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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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China: Army-Party Relations

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*The People's Liberation Army (PLA), is represented by a handful of powerful soldier-politicians, who provide the military with an important political voice. Although this leadership frequently has been cool to the reform policies associated with Deng Xiaoping, the army and its leaders ultimately have gone along. We expect senior officers to play an important role in succession politics but do not believe they can exercise a veto over Hu Yaobang's continuation as party general secretary.*

The State of the Relationship

In our view, the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976) gave rise to an interpretation of the PLA's role in politics that continues to color many analyses. At its most extreme, the conventional wisdom holds that the army aggressively asserts its institutional interests at every opportunity; that it has across-the-board differences with China's civilian leadership; that civilian failure to propitiate this purported military opposition runs the risk of some unspecified--but presumably violent--retaliation; and that, as a consequence, the military is the arbiter of Chinese politics.

We believe army-party relations are not nearly so strained. Despite significant differences, we judge army-party relations to be on an even keel. Moreover, we believe the following statements more accurately characterize the PLA's political role:

- Political opinions within the PLA are diverse; no single military leader can "deliver" the army and the PLA does not present a solid institutional front.

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- It is not aggressively interventionist--its forceful intervention during the Cultural Revolution in fact was at the behest of the civilian leadership.
- The civilian party leaders have fashioned policies that often are not to the army's advantage but have suffered none of the fatal consequences anticipated in conventional assessments.
- Although an important political player--11 current Politburo members can be said to represent some form of military "constituency"--the PLA is in no way the overriding factor in Chinese politics or in the political succession to Deng.

### Army-Party Differences

There are pronounced differences on some policy questions between army and party leaders, but none that the military regards as vital and beyond compromise. We believe that many of the strains in the army-party relationship--especially the ideological disputes that spilled into the open press in 1981 and 1982--had their roots in the PLA's General Political Department, which last September was placed under the leadership of Yu Qiuli and has since vigorously promoted Deng's programs.

Generally speaking, a pattern of give and take, in which the party has made modest concessions in return for support on larger issues, has been characteristic of contemporary army-party politics:

- China's senior soldiers and the civilian leadership are generally in agreement on the importance of military modernization but differ on the army's relative priority in overall modernization plans.
- The senior soldier-politicians have generally cooperated in efforts to revise recruitment criteria, retire aged or incompetent personnel, consolidate commands, demobilize excessive ground force and support personnel, and purge the politically unreliable despite some reservations about these policies voiced within the PLA.
- Although the problem of Mao's legacy has not completely been laid to rest--the army has sought to salvage whatever elements of Mao's familiar doctrine appear relevant to current conditions--the PLA is being weaned from Mao's ideas through reindoctrination and retraining.
- The conservative disposition of some PLA leaders had led them and like-minded civilians to voice reservations about some of Deng's economic reforms and undesirable side effects generated by the policies, but Beijing's

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senior civilians have generally made adjustments to meet these objections.

Data on military opinions concerning foreign policy is particularly thin; we believe foreign policy is essentially a civilian preserve.

#### Central Military Commission

We believe Deng and his allies intend the new Central Military Commission, a state body formally inaugurated in June at the National People's Congress convocation, to assume the principal role in day-to-day military administration and operations. These functions have traditionally been the province of the party's Military Commission. Both organizations are headed by Deng and share the same leading personnel.

With nine members--three of whom are sickly and largely inactive, and one, Deng, occupied with a diverse and crowded schedule--the new commission is a compact, predominantly reform-oriented body that in our view marks a step toward a rationalized, more efficient higher command structure. We believe the new commission is expected to promote Deng's military program by:

- Enabling Deng to circumvent political obstructions in the far larger party commission.
- Institutionalizing a new command relationship that effectively places the military within the state structure, a structural as well as perceptual change that allows military professionals the run of their technical domains and presumably reduces the routine interference of party hacks.
- Creating an institutional barrier, however permeable at present, that reduces the possibility of a small group within the civilian party advancing their own political ends by manipulating the army--a dreaded Cultural Revolution scenario.
- Reinforcing other measures that have been taken to neutralize the military factor in Chinese politics, such as reducing the quota of party members within the army, shrinking the army's representation on national level political bodies, and replacing officers and men cast in the orthodox Maoist mold with newly indoctrinated recruits of greater educational and technical accomplishment.

#### After Deng

The ongoing turnover of military personnel can only help the succession chances of Hu Yaobang, who has a large bloc of natural

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allies in the generation of frustrated middle level commanders whose promotions have been blocked while the old guard continued to serve. Our impression of the Chinese military leadership is that it is a basically traditionalist, professionally oriented group. In our judgment, soldier-politicians will exercise their influence within the political rules of the game, as a part of the total leadership and in conjunction with their civilian allies and not as a political wild card. Those who retain a vested interest in policies begun under Deng will stand to gain by supporting Hu and policy continuity.



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